

# Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

Vol. 104 No. 3

Published: 20 September 1984

The seven hundred and fifty-fourth Meeting of the Club was held in the Senior Common Room, South Side, Imperial College, London, S.W.7 on Tuesday, 3 July 1984 at 7 p.m. The attendance was 23 Members and 12 guests.

Members present were: B. GRAY (Chairman), Dr G. BEVEN, Mrs DIANA BRADLEY, P. A. BROWN, D. R. CALDER, R. D. CHANCELLOR, S. J. W. COLES, P. J. CONDER, R. A. N. CROUCHER, Sir HUGH ELLIOTT, A. GIBBS, D. GRIFFIN, M. C. HODGSON, P. HOGG, R. H. KETTLE, Dr A. G. KNOX, J. KING, Dr J. F. MONK, J. G. PARKER, R. E. F. PEAL, R. E. SCOTT, S. A. H. STATHAM and C. E. WHEELER

Guests present were: Mrs SUZANNE BEVEN, Dr C. C. H. ELLIOTT, Mrs MARIE-THERESE ELLIOTT, P. HAYMAN, Mrs JOANNA HOGG, M. MORTON, Mrs ELIZABETH PEAL, J. A. RANDALL, Dr A. S. RICHFORD, Mrs JO RICHFORD, Mrs ANN SCOTT and Mrs C. E. WHEELER.

Dr A. S. Richford spoke on "Black Vultures in Majorca" and an abstract of his address, which he has kindly prepared, will be published in a future number of the *Bulletin*.

## Predation by Pied Crows *Corvus albus* on Gambian Epauletted Fruit Bats *Epomophorus gambianus*

by M. E. Smalley

Received 27 October 1983

Rosevear (1965) records a West African specimen of the Gambian Epauletted Fruit Bat *Epomophorus gambianus* that had been captured by a crow, presumably a Pied Crow *Corvus albus*. At first sight capture of bats by *C. albus* seems unlikely, because the crows feed largely on the ground, taking immobile or slowly moving food items. Indeed, they are primarily vegetarians, although they will scavenge both plant and animal matter. When they do act as predators it is usually on sick animals or those that have difficulty escaping (Brooke & Grobler 1973, Gwahaba 1975).

There are recent reports of raptors, other than the Bat Hawk *Macheirhamphus alcinus*, taking bats. Spotted Eagle Owls *Bubo africanus* and Black Kites *Milvus migrans* have taken fruit bats (Kingdon 1974), and several birds of prey capture small insectivorous bats as they emerge from confined day time roosts (Pettet 1976, Cyrus 1983, Hanmer 1983, Stephens & Blackwood 1983). *C. albus* has also, once, been recorded swooping down and capturing a small serotine bat, *Eptesicus copensis* (Brooke & Grobler 1973).

During a study of the birds on a campus (13° 40'N, 16° 50'W) in The Gambia, West Africa, 1978-1981, I saw *C. albus* attacking adult *E. gambianus* 4 times: 9 and 12 June 1978, 1 December 1978 and 23 June 1981. On each occasion the bat was on the ground, lying on its back apparently helpless while a Pied Crow jabbed at it with its beak. Such was the noise made by the bat that on each occasion the crow was eventually disturbed by a dog rushing to investigate. The crow was silent. The noise also attracted, on different days, Beautiful Sunbirds

*Nectarinia pulchella*, Scarlet-chested Sunbirds *N. senegalensis* and common Bulbuls *Pycnonotus barbatus*, all of which gave their own alarm calls from nearby perches.

The blows of the crows were randomly directed, and caused relatively little external damage considering the force and frequency of the jabbing. Only 2 of the 4 bats showed external injuries; one had a small tear in a wing membrane, but another sustained extensive wounds about the neck and thorax. This was the only bat to have a youngster, uninjured, clinging to its belly.

The crows must have caught the bats in their daytime resting sites, since the attacks occurred between 0800 and 1145 hrs, long after the bats had gone to roost, which they do in loose groups in tall trees (Marshall & McWilliam 1982). Bats were regularly heard on the campus calling from trees such as *Peltophorum* sp., Mango *Mangifera indica* and Neem *Azadirachta indica*. Although crows were watched walking and deliberately searching along branches of trees, the capture of a resting bat was not observed. However a crow was seen, once, to fly from a *Peltophorum* tree to a Baobab *Adansonia digitata* carrying a screaming bat in its feet. The two were lost to sight, but the bat obviously escaped since the alarm calls stopped and the crow flew away without its prey. *C. albus* has been described systematically searching palm leaves for nesting Palm Swifts *Cypsiurus parvus* and capturing the sitting adult swift (Ade 1975); and Benson (1946) watched *C. albus* seizing a sleeping fruit bat from a *Khaya niassica* tree.

Although *C. albus* is clearly not an efficient hunter of *E. gambianus*, some bats were killed; 3 times crows were seen with freshly killed bats — 13 and 22 June 1978 and 21 June 1981. Twice the crow was feeding on the bat on the ground, and once the dead bat was being carried in flight. Seven of the 8 incidents involving *E. gambianus* occurred during June. On the campus, *C. albus* began nest building in February or March and usually had young in the nest during May or June (Gore 1981 and pers. obs.). So, whilst frequently unsuccessful, predation on the bat does succeed and is attempted most often when *C. albus* is feeding its young.

It is interesting that *C. albus* was never seen to attack the fruit bat *Eidolon helvum* which roosted in large numbers in Rhun Palms *Borassus aethiopicum*, the campus tree most often used by the crows for nesting. Most Pied Crows weigh 500-600g (Gwahaba 1975), *E. gambianus* 100-200g (Marshall & McWilliam 1982, D. Pye) and *E. helvum* 250-311g (Kingdon 1974). Clearly a bat weighing up to 30% of the crow's body weight was potential prey, whilst one weighing almost 50% was not.

*Acknowledgements:* I am grateful for the help of Professor D. Pye in establishing the weights of *E. gambianus*.

#### References:

- Ade, B. 1975. Pied Crows preying on Palm Swifts. *Honeyguide* 81: 36-37.  
 Benson, C. W. 1946. Field notes from Nyasaland. *Ostrich* 17: 297-319.  
 Brooke, R. K. & Grobler, J. H. 1973. Notes on the foraging and relationships of *Corvus albus*. *Arnoldia* 6(10): 13 pages.  
 Cyrus, D. 1983. African Goshawk hunting bats at dusk and midday. *Bokmakierie* 35: 23-24.  
 Gore, M. E. J. 1981. *Birds of The Gambia*. British Ornithologists' Union Check-list No. 3: London.  
 Gwahaba, J. J. 1975. A contribution to the biology of the Pied Crow *Corvus albus* Müller in Uganda. *J. E. Afr. Nat. Hist. Soc. Nat. Mus.* No. 153.  
 Hanmer, D. B. 1983. Red-necked Falcons hunting bats. *Bokmakierie*. 35: 24.  
 Kingdon, J. 1974. *East African Mammals* Vol. IIA. Academic Press: London, New York.

- Marshall, A. G. & McWilliam, A. N. 1982. Ecological observations on epomorphine fruit-bats (Megachiroptera) in West African savanna woodland. *J. Zool. Lond.* 198: 53-67.
- Pettet, A. 1976. Shikra *Accipiter badius* taking bats. *Bull. Nig. Orn. Soc.* 12(41): 42.
- Rosevear, D. R. 1965. *The Bats of West Africa*. British Museum (Natural History).
- Stephens, W. & Blackwood, V. 1983. Wahlberg's Eagle catching bats in Malawi. *Ostrich* 54: 25.

Address. Dr. M. E. Smalley, Zoology Department, University of Nairobi, Box 30197, Nairobi, Kenya.

© British Ornithologists' Club 1984.

## A specimen record of Hume's Tawny Owl *Strix butleri* from Egypt

by Steven M. Goodman & Hesham Sabry

Received 22 November 1983

Hume's Tawny Owl *Strix butleri* has been regarded as one of the least known birds of the Middle East (eg. by Hübner & Etchécopar 1970, Harrison 1982). However, recent work has shown it to be not uncommon in some desert regions of the Middle East near permanent water sources. Leshem (1981) noted 31 places where the bird had been recorded: 18 in the Judean Desert, 9 in the Negev Desert and 4 from the Sinai Peninsula. It has also recently been recorded on the Arabian Peninsula from near Jidda south to North Yemen and in the north central desert region (Jennings 1981). Thus, although the specimen reported here appears to be the first record of this species from the African continent, its occurrence in the Egyptian Red Sea mountains is not totally unexpected.

### COLLECTION OF SPECIMEN AND DESCRIPTION OF THE LOCALITY

On 16 February 1982 while camping near the Roman ruins of Medinet Nugrus (24° 37'N, 34° 47'E), in Wadi Nugrus, a northern spur of Wadi Gemel, c. 54 km west of the Red Sea tarmac road, Egypt, H. S. observed a medium-sized owl after sunset fly from a rock 10 m from camp. He pursued the bird and found it perched on another rock 25 m from camp, where it was subsequently collected. The owl was not shy and allowed human approach to within 20 m. Its sex was not determined. The specimen was prepared as a flat skin and is housed in the private collection of H. S., Maadi, Egypt. After comparison with published descriptions and a specimen in the Giza Zoological Museum, the bird was identified as Hume's Tawny Owl (measurements presented in Table 1).

The area surrounding Medinet Nugrus is typical of the Egyptian Red Sea mountains — worn, north-south oriented peaks of igneous and metamorphic formations, separated by sand and rock-filled wadis. At approximately 24° 25'N, 34° 36'E the mountain chain is broken by a lower plain which is transversed to the east by Wadi Gemel and to the west by Wadi Natash. The major peaks and ridges bordering this lower plain and in the tributary systems of Wadi Gemel near Medinet Nugrus include (m above sea-level): to the north Gebel Hafafit (1320), Gebel Sikeit (769) and Gebel Zabara (1360), and to the south Gebel el Mukhattata (570) and Gebel Umm Riqeiba (568). There are several fresh water wells in the general area of Medinet Nugrus.